

CROSS COUNTRY RACING TACTICS

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Tiger Woods, love him or hate him, he is one of the most effective golfers ever to play the sport. He prepares and plans better than any other golfer on the tour. Tiger has a goal shot for every green he plays and a back-up plan for every possible scenario that might happen. Tiger will spend hours, days and weeks with his planning so that the day of his match he does not have to think he just plays golf. The better you plan for your race the more effective you will be and the more positive you will react on race day and the less you will have to think. What preparations do you currently do on a big race day? Can you make them better?

Cross Country is a very different sport than track and field. Each course offers something unique and different and depending on the weather conditions the course can change yet again. Cross Country runners have to navigate a variety of different surfaces, terrains and obstacles. The individual runner's perspective can hurt him or help him. Each course needs to be analyzed for individual runner's strengths and weaknesses.

It's 1982 and I just lost my state title and my course record. I was just a junior in high school. I was defeated. I was beaten by a very worthy opponent who smashed my course record with a time that was said would never be broken. I felt broken in that moment. Losing all that was the best thing that ever happened to me because it woke me up to the fact that I was made of more. Later it energized me and made me learn a very valuable lesson. Cross country racing offers so much more opportunity if you just sit back and take a different look at it. What opportunities are you missing out of?

The summer of my senior year I went out to the state championship course at Holmdel, New Jersey. I ran that course forward and backwards several times. I walked it, jogged it, stopped took a look at every angle from the front to the back, and sides. I analyzed every possible advantage it had to offer. I wanted to know 100 – 200 - 400 meters ahead of time where I needed to position myself so I could run that course faster than anyone ever has. I knew that not only did I have to know this course, and my strengths and weaknesses, but I also had to find a way to make it my playground and I did.

I broke the course up into sections and gave each section a name of something meaningful and fun to me. The start I called "THE FUNNEL" and I would picture a funnel cake because the course funneled into a tight trail leading into a wooded area. "THE ROLLER COASTER" came

next. I named it that because it had lots of steep rolling up and down hills. I would visualize myself leaping from the top of one hill to the top of the next. The wooded area broke out into the "THE PRAIRIE. This area was more flat and open but you could get lost in the tall grass. "THE BOWL" came after The Prairie and this was and still is considered the hardest part of the course. In fact, it is so well known there is a facebook page called "We Who Ran The Bowl". It is a giant downhill that leads around to an even bigger uphill. The whole thing looks like a big giant bowl. "TENNIS CLUB" came after and it offered slight rolling hills leading to a set of tennis courts we had to run around to enter "THE ENCHANTED FOREST" - my favorite. The course wound around into a wooded soft pine trail that offered a lot of strategic down hills. It was so quiet and peaceful because it was not a very heavily viewed section. It was silent but deadly and I would rock and roll through this section. The forest opened up to the last 400 meters which was fitting to call "THE FINISH"

By breaking the course up into manageable sections I was able to stay focused the entire time. Each section of the course offered something I needed to do as well. I would know each uphill and downhill, turn and footing. I would make sure I was running the shortest possible race in the most efficient way. I took advantage of every opportunity. I would plan for blind turns and take off on the other side. I would run the steep up hills and surge off the top for 20 – 30 meters. If I knew there was a bad footing in an area I would set myself up on the side of the trail that would get me through the fastest and safest. I would stay in the moment and not think about the end. I had to work each section. I left no stone unturned and prepared myself accordingly.

By knowing the course my coach and I incorporate things that were important into my training and racing. The overall goal was that on race day it was easy and I did not have to think, just react. I went into automatic mode. The plan worked and I ran a 17:35, took 6 seconds off the unbreakable record and that time still stands today – almost 27 years later.

HERE IS HOW YOU CAN ANALYZE YOUR RACE COURSE:

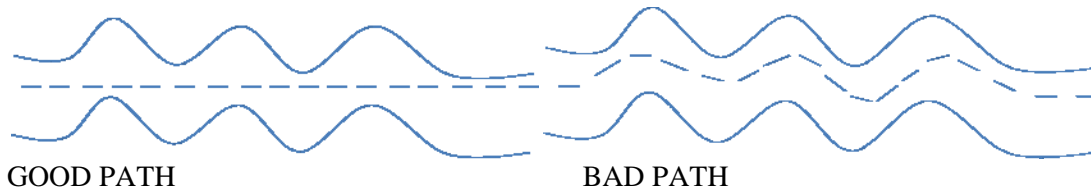
The Start Line is extremely important especially where you and your team are situated on it. Stand on the line, look out, and find your first target. It could be a turn, hill, etc. Draw a line from the start to that focal point either in your head or better yet on the map. Walk or jog down to that focal point. Stop turn around and draw the line back. Make a point to picture in your head the competition and where you need to be on race day. If you don't know where you are on the line, then walk each section and know where you need to be and what you need to do. Once you got it, then do some practice starts and visualize it. Remember, if the course leads to a sharp turn you may want to position yourself a little wide so you have room to move. Float yourself to that position once the gun goes off prior to the turn. Don't wait until that turn or it could be too late. You make things happen – don't leave it to chance. On race day, when I was on the start line, I looked at my first focal point. I didn't look at my competition. It kept my nerves down.

Break the race into manageable meaningful sections. From this point forward, I recommend 4 – 6 sections total. Look for opportunities within those sections and other focal points. In the more technical areas stop and look forward, and backwards. Get a perspective. Walk it and run it out. Strategize the best possible position solution on the course to be in and look at an alternative, for

the “just in case”? Think about, how far back you need to set up so you can move freely and float to that position. There is a lot more to think about than just letting racing come to chance. You make things happen.

Here are a few more things to take advantage of in racing:

1. **RUN POINT TO POINT:** Always look ahead and plot a course. If you are warming up on the course pick your path. Visualize your path with unknown competitors- The more you see it, feel it, and taste it, in your head the more likely it will happen.



2. **HILLS:** If the course is very hilly it is important to plan ahead. For example it would not be too smart to start running up the hill with all your effort or you are going to go into oxygen debt and your body will slow. The hill will hurt you. It is important to run the hill controlled and accelerate hard for 20 – 30 meters off the top to get you back into your race pace. A big mistake a lot of young runners do is run the hill hard at the bottom and slow off the top to catch their breath. It takes about 100 – 200 meters to get back into the race: Lost time. During your hill training phase work on running the hill controlled and accelerate hard for 20 – 30 meters off the top. This strategy gets you back into your race pace quickly and effectively.
3. **BLIND SPOTS:** using surges in blind spots - this will shock your competitors mentally. Blind spots are anything that takes you out of view from your competitors. They can be any of the following:
 - A. Tree's
 - B. Bushes
 - C. Buildings
 - D. Even Crowds can create blind spots
4. **FOOTING** Check out the footing and choose your spike and path carefully. If it is hard you want to use a short spike. If the course is wet and soft you may need a longer one. Also, when assessing the course look for area's to run where you can avoid holes, ruts, and anything that will cause you to increase steps, work, or effort. We also don't want you to go into a hole.
5. **WEATHER:** Be aware of the weather conditions and make adjustments. Be ready for all types of weather. If visiting the course before the race, make plans for all weather conditions. For example, it's not smart to throw in a surge in a real slippery muddy area where there is little area for movement. The effort will be high and the gains short.
6. **TRY DIFFERENT THINGS IN YOUR DUAL/PRACTICE MEETS:** Do not be afraid to try different strategies in your smaller meets. You may want to try starting slower to see if you have more power at the end. You may want to go out faster and see if you can hang on. The time not to try something different is on your big race day. Unless you have nothing to loss.
7. **KNOWING YOUR COMPETITORS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS:** If you know your competitors strengths and weakness it can be very helpful. On one hand, work his weakness hard in those sections but respect his strengths on the other. It can be helpful but also remember to race your

race and not get caught up into someone else's. You can control what you can control. You cannot control what others are going to do.

8. SELF-TALK / POWER MOVEMENT: Make sure you utilize positive self talk and power movements - It will only make you better.

Below is a PRE RACE COURSE ASSESMENT form at the bottom of this document. Use it or make your own up.

There are so many things to take advantage of in racing but understanding that course is critical! I truly believe in making that race plan fun and interactive. The more positive laughter the more passionate you become with the course. The race is your monopoly game. Play it well and have fun doing it!! GOOD LUCK!

NEXT WEEK LOOK FOR “TRAINING WELL BUT RACING POORLY – WHY DOES THAT HAPPEN.”

- **Do you start well but tire around the mile to mile and half?**
- **Has your performance taken a dive from one season to the next with no explanation?**
- **GIRLS THIS IS A MUST READ FOR YOU.**



**SUB5
PRE RACE COURSE ASSESMENT:**

AREA (explain general area):
Remember to plan for all weather conditions:

START (explain start conditions):
Starting line:
Footing:
Direction to head in:
Crowd:
Etc:

400 meters
Explain all the details of the first 400 meters: Course description:
How you plan on going out and what is around you:

Mile or SECTION IT OFF AND NAME IT _____:

Explain all the details?
Include obstacles, footing, surges, etc.

Where you need to be:

Etc:

2 Mile or SECTION IT OFF AND NAME IT _____:

Explain all the details?
Include obstacles, footing, surges, etc.

Where you need to be:

Etc:

3rd Mile OR SECTION IT OFF AND NAME IT _____:

Explain all the details?
Include obstacles, footing, surges, etc.

Where you need to be:

Where you need to start your kick:

ADD MORE SECTIONS IF YOU WANT MORE DETAIL OR SECTIONS